

Our three-year-old grandson, William, who lives in Grand Cayman, now knows how to initiate a Facetime call to us all by himself. When he calls, I read books to him, we sing songs, and we play games. One game he loves to play is a form of *Follow the Leader*, in which he makes crazy faces, then I make the same face. Or, I will make a funny face and he then follows. It is just so much fun! However, our game abruptly ends when the follower decides he no longer wants to copy the leader, when he decides he wants to do something else.

Today, Jesus teaches the **disciples** and each one of us about what it means to *Follow the Leader, Jesus style!* He tells the disciples what it really means to follow **him** as *their* leader. He is alarmingly blunt about what it means to follow him, and Peter does not want to go there.

Peter has just experienced a monumental *come to Jesus moment* where he responded to Jesus saying, “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God!” Jesus had just called Peter a rock and said that he would build his “called out” beloved community, the church, on the rock of Peter’s testimony and confession of faith. Jesus has just made Peter a kind of deputy leader in the kingdom of God. And, now, Jesus seems to ruin the moment they had all just experienced when he tells Peter and the

others, "Look, the road to Jerusalem is filled with nails. They'll pierce me and put an end to me, but after three days God will reclaim my life."

Well, only a short time before this, Jesus had given Peter the "keys of the kingdom," a major leadership position, with the power to bind and loose. And, as Peter now hears Jesus speak of what lies ahead, Peter has the **audacity** to seek to use his newfound sense of authority as he **attempts to bind Jesus!** Peter clearly had a certain vision in mind regarding what it means for Jesus to be the leader they had hoped for. And, the things Jesus is now saying certainly do **not** fit his perception of the leadership they anticipated in a Messiah. Peter takes Jesus aside and says, "Come to your senses, man. Don't you remember I just pronounced you the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God? These things that you are talking about don't happen to God; and God forbid, they must never happen to you." Now, what really goes **unsaid** is, "Because, of course, that would mean that these things of which you speak would also happen to someone who followed you, someone like me."

Peter's perception of the Messiah's leadership and his own importance as *keeper of the keys* is then abruptly **shattered** as Jesus barks back at him saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal, a stumbling block to me, for you have set your mind not on divine things, but

on human things." Well, the rest of the air escapes from Peter's self-important balloon as Jesus goes on to say, "You want these keys? Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

Peter and the disciples were ready for a Messiah who was supposed to come and restore the Jewish kingdom, make the Jewish kingdom great again, by overthrowing oppressive empires, and they saw themselves assisting in this effort. But now, Jesus is talking about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die! Jesus gives them an ad hoc lecture in God's plan for the Messiah and the kind of kingdom **he** is ushering in. And, following this kind of leader is just the **antithesis** of what they had anticipated.

Well, in our culture today, I have to say we are no different. We are a people who are interested in winning. We are people who want to be in charge and on top. We are self-absorbed people who want to stay within the cocoon of our comfortable lives, stay in our little bubbles, and not get into the thick of the need in this world. We are people who live in a very self-centered, narcissistic culture, wanting to avoid the pain and messiness

of life. We do everything we can to avoid suffering and self-sacrifice. Yet, Jesus tells us that if we want to gain life, life that truly matters, we are to follow him and **do as he does**. He tells us we will gain life that **truly** matters when we follow him and do things like **sooth** the pain of the sick; **care** for children in need; hammer nails in houses for those without shelter; **share** bread with the hungry; visit those in prison; help and assist people who have lost everything in fires like those taking place in California, or in hurricanes like Laura; work to end and dismantle oppression of any kind; work to dismantle the racism that plagues our culture. And, Jesus calls us to do this in the selfless way he models for us, by letting go of our egos – by **letting our egos die**. And, letting our egos die is quite honestly, one of the **hardest** aspects of discipleship, let alone leadership, because it leads us to living lives of sacrificial love as Paul instructs in today’s reading from Romans. It means we become **accomplices** with Jesus in doing things like blessing those who persecute us, **blessing** and not cursing them. It means **never** seeking vengeance and retribution because God says, “Vengeance is mine.” It means feeding our **enemies** and giving them water to drink because only **good** overcomes evil. Yes, following the leader, Jesus style, is difficult, but the rewards are great.

Friends, like Peter and the other disciples, we face the chasm between Jesus' call to discipleship and our own lives as part-time volunteers for the Gospel. Few Christians abandon everything for the Gospel's sake. Most of us simply fit our Christianity into the open spots on our calendars. But in this passage Jesus links the life of discipleship with **his own path**. We are to follow **his** leading. And, astonishingly, Jesus offers **crucifixion** to those who would follow him. In a bold assertion of God's boundary-crossing grace, Jesus takes as his logo and brand the grim killing tool of the world's superpower and says to us, "Take up your cross. If you want to follow me, deny yourself; if you want to find your life, give up your life."

The gospel is always an invitation to death before it bestows new life. This is how God's love will redeem and resurrect sinners from the futility of life devoted to profit and winning and the "all about me" syndrome that is so present in our country. Because Jesus leads by dying on the cross, we may now give ourselves to him and die to the powers that possess and control us. Following Jesus is about following him **into** the messiness and dysfunction of the world and **carrying** the cross. We do **not** control or bind God, and we do **not** stipulate or give Jesus the conditions to our

discipleship; instead, we **risk** contamination and insecurity by **releasing** the need to protect our very own lives.

Following the leader, Jesus style, **means living in solidarity with Jesus' own way of life in this world.** Instead of binding Jesus for our own self-preservation, we must faithfully follow and bear **witness** to **him**, “even at the risk of losing our lives.” And, the most amazing aspect of following the leader Jesus' style and participating in the very life of Christ's living body in the world, is that we find ourselves **resurrected** to **new** life.

It is hard to follow Jesus to this place, but he says he will make good on his promise. Although new life, life that truly matters, will not be an easy life, Jesus promises that the day is coming when the “Son of Man” will appear in glory. God has **already** acted decisively and ultimately in the person of Jesus. God has already acted! And so, we follow, trusting that there will come a day when God will wipe away all tears, a day when death will be no more, a day when mourning and crying and pain will be no more. The promise of full redemption for this entire world is unmistakable and certain. Thanks be to God!